

IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Troublesome backup tape unit mars snazzy Compaq Deskpro

The Compaq Deskpro 286 is one of the snazziest personal computers around.

For business users, it provides some attractive features that are missing on equivalent IBM computers. And it's completely IBM PC-compatible — it runs all the software designed for IBM machines, so you don't have to worry about purchasing a program that might not work with the machine.

Furthermore, it's "hardware compatible" with IBM PCs, which means you can use any of the popular PC-compatible peripherals or expansion cards with the Compaq computer just as if it were an IBM model.

But watch out. In testing the machine and using it for my normal business needs for several months, I discovered some drawbacks that prevent it from receiving a wholehearted recommendation.

Before discussing the drawbacks, here are some of the factors that make the Compaq Deskpro 286 one of the best personal computers on the market today:

✓ For roughly the same cost as the IBM PC-AT, one of the high-end models in IBM's PC family of products, the Compaq machine provides faster processing speed, a larger-capacity hard disk — 30 megabytes vs. 20 megabytes — an internal backup tape system, better documentation and a more luxurious "feel."

✓ A 12-inch, amber-colored screen that's a joy to use. Everyone raves about how "easy on the eyes" it is — especially for extended use. The standard green-colored IBM PC screen is so good that it's hard to beat, but this Compaq screen has succeeded.

✓ The Deskpro 286 is supported and serviced by many of the same computer retailers who carry the IBM PC line — and it frequently wins when compared head-to-head with IBM machines.

✓ Compaq computers are safe buys. The company has been tremendously successful and is one of the most stable and predictable of

same software, has more attractive features, and costs slightly less.

However, I found that the renowned reliability of Compaq's computers was not demonstrated by one specific component.

A key selling feature of the Deskpro 286 — but the one that gave me the most trouble — was the built-in backup tape drive.

If you have a personal computer with a hard disk, it is absolutely vital to back up your data on a regular basis. The disks tend to malfunction at the worst times, and inexperienced and experienced operators alike are

prone to inadvertently erasing important files while trying to do other operations — it's a fact of life. The only solution is to do regular backups on floppy disks or tape, so a second copy is available if you need it.

The larger your hard disk, the more vital the backup function becomes. With the Deskpro 286, an internal tape-cartridge system is built right into the personal computer itself. It uses cartridges about the same size as audio tape cassettes, normal wider-tape cartridges.

Here are the drawbacks I discovered with the Compaq tape unit:

✓ Limited capacity. Each cartridge can only hold 10 megabytes of data, even though the computer's internal hard disk holds 30 megabytes. Since computers with large capacity disks are normally used for applications with large files — like data bases over 10 megabytes in size — it was impossible to start a backup and then forget about it. Switching tape cartridges was always necessary.

✓ Too time-consuming. The tape unit normally takes about 15 minutes per cartridge, and then two or three more minutes to do a verification. If a verification error occurs, as frequently happened with our unit, it aborted the backup. It's then necessary to start over again.

Furthermore, during the sever-



all the companies making "PC-clones."

Unlike some large computer firms such as NCR, Sperry and others that appear to be dabbling, without much success, in the low-end computer marketplace, Compaq's entire thrust is in this area. It sells more PCs to businesses than all other competitors except IBM, and it's obvious Compaq will be around awhile.

Unlike many of the PC-clone manufacturers that concentrate on lower-priced copies of IBM machines — Tandy and Zenith, for example — Compaq strives to emphasize quality, reliability and extra benefits. Every time IBM comes out with a PC model, Compaq seems to jump in with a more attractive model that runs the

al-month period of my continuous use, the tape unit's reliability deteriorated.

For a vital component and a key selling feature, the tape unit was a disappointment. It did not get *bad enough* to warrant an expensive service call, but did not work *well enough* to provide satisfaction.

The bottom line: It would not be fair to eliminate the otherwise excellent Compaq Deskpro 286 from consideration just because of my poor experience with the internal tape unit.

But I'm now more apt to recommend standalone tape-backup units available from specialized manufacturers, and suggest to my clients other Compaq models that do not include the internal tape.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant and organizer of the Personal Computer Managers Association, a new national organization. He can be reached at the PCMA, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.
